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STATE FOR EAP/MLS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/8/2018

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SUBJECT: PAY-OFF DISPUTE SPARKS MINOR CLASH ON THAI-BURMA BORDER

REF: BANGKOK 3021 (MINOR CLASHES ERUPT ALONG THAI BORDERS WITH CAMBODIA AND BURMA)

CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, CG, ConGen, Chiang Mai.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary and Comment

¶1. (C) The October 3 border incursion by the Burmese junta-backed Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) into Thai territory in Tak Province was a small-scale action sparked by a dispute over farming pay-offs. The action, which involved fewer than a dozen DKBA troops, damaged the house of a Thais sub-district official and killed a soldier of the rival, anti-junta Karen National Union (KNU). Thai troops have since secured the area.

¶2. (C) This part of the Thai-Burma border has long been an area of DKBA-KNU conflict, with the rival groups competing for control over pay-offs from local farming, logging, mining, and smuggling. Local Thai authorities have lodged a protest over this latest clash with the Thailand-Burma Border Township Committee for the Myawaddy-Mae Sot district, and await a response from their Burmese counterparts. End Summary and Comment.

Small Unit Crosses Border Over "Tax" Dispute

¶3. (C) A group of DKBA soldiers launched a small-scale attack across the Thai border in Tak Province's Umphang District on the evening of October 3 (reftel). Consulate sources in Mae Sot with the Thai National Intelligence Agency and the KNU's intelligence and logistics command provided the following details:

-- the attacking unit was comprised of 8-to-10 soldiers from the pro-regime DKBA's 907th battalion;

-- the troops entered the Thai village of Mae Klong Khee to "settle" a dispute with the local Thai sub-district head, who is ethnic Karen and pro-KNU;

-- the dispute involved DKBA demands for "tax" payments from Thai villagers who engage in contract farming on lands they lease on the Burmese side of the border in areas claimed by the DKBA;

-- the sub-district head had fled before the arrival of the troops, who expressed their displeasure by shooting up his house;

-- the action lasted about 30 minutes, with the lone casualty being a KNU soldier who was killed when he got caught up in the DKBA's withdrawal; and

-- a platoon-size Royal Thai Army unit has deployed to secure the area, but arrived too late to confront the DKBA attackers.

Local Authorities Will Address Latest Clash

14. (C) Our sources reported that the Mae Klong Khee village lies close to the Thai-Burma border and lacks a clear-cut demarcation line. The village is frequently visited by DKBA and KNU soldiers who come to collect food supplies, particularly during harvest season. It has long been an area where the DKBA and KNU compete for control over pay-offs from local farming, logging, mining, and smuggling. This latest clash will be addressed at the local level -- Thai authorities have lodged a protest with the bilateral Border Township Committee for the Myawaddy-Mae Sot district, and await a response from their Burmese counterparts.

MORROW